

# INDEXA



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## 3B7RF DXpedition Report *by G. I. Wagner, K5KG*

*"Ten years ago I visited Mauritius for the first time. The beauty of the island and its friendly multi-cultural inhabitants left me with delightful imaginations and reminiscences. In 1996 I resumed my former links with the intention to celebrate my 75th anniversary and 50 years of ham activity in a special way: I was thinking about an expedition to the St. Brandon Islands!"*

—Karl, HB9JAI

### How everything began

Prior to our 3B7RF operation, St. Brandon was number 17 on the CC's most wanted list. There has never been a large DXpedition from this location. The most recent operation was in 1991 by Jacky, 3B8CF, operating as 3B8CF/3B7. In recent years, amateur radio licenses have not been issued to "outsiders" for operation in St. Brandon.

### The team

Karl initially put together a DXpedition team to operate from St. Brandon with members of HB9RF, the Zug amateur radio club. The team consisted of Hans Peter, HB9BXE; Joe, HB9AJW; René, HB9BQI; Christine, HB9BQW; and Eric, HB9ADP.

At the 1996 Dayton Hamvention, Karl invited George, K5KG; and the team was joined later by Willy, HB9AHL; Kurt, HB9AFI; Urs, HB9ABO; Hugo, HB9AFH; Yuuji, JA3IG; Walter, W7SE; and Jacky, 3B8CF.



Group shot at the 3B7RF CW station.

### Planning and preparations

By mid-1997, a budget was established and the group began logistical and technical planning and a search for sponsors. In September 1997, Karl spent three weeks in Mauritius to obtain a license and charter a ship. By the time he returned to Switzerland, Karl had obtained written permission for a landing at Rafael Island in St. Brandon and a verbal promise from the Mauritius Telecommunications Authority for a 3B7 ham license! That's how it all began.

### Mauritius

On May 3rd, Mauritius welcomed the team with humid and warm air, wind and clouds. Karl, HB9JAI; René, HB9BQI; and George, K5KG; went one week ahead of the rest of the team with 500 kg of freight to secure the radio license and make last minute preparations for the ship and supplies. When the team arrived on Sunday, they got their first look at the *Umbrina II*, the vessel they would get

(Continued on page 2)

Inside...

**DX World Guide—DJ9ZB**  
**New Life Members**  
**Extra Help**

**1998-1999 INDEXA Ballot**  
**INDEXA Membership Application**

## St. Brandon.....from page 1

to know all too well in the weeks ahead. Built in 1935 in Glasgow and reconstructed in 1955, the *Umbrina II* was an old but noble lady. She was a cruising yacht with a length of about 30 meters and equipped with two, 250 HP diesel engines. There was sufficient stowing room, modern navigation aids and an experienced crew of four who gave our team confidence in the venture ahead.

### In rough seas

Monday morning, May 4th, the *Umbrina II* was loaded at the pier in Port Louis. Radio equipment and food were stowed on the lower deck and the antennas, masts and generators were put on the upper deck. All gear was securely lashed down for the expected rough seas, a move that paid off handsomely.

The team left the solitude and security of Mauritius mid-day with 470km ahead to Rafael Island. At first, it was pleasant to sit on the upper deck and enjoy the sunshine; however, after a few drenchings with sea water, the group quickly realized that the saloon on the main deck was the only place to be, and the only thing to do was lay low for the long trip ahead. During the night the seas grew to six and seven meters, and the ups and downs and heavy heel-overs were ceaseless. The *Umbrina II* made 10 knots, and three-quarters of those aboard were seasick. There was no change in the rolling and pitching until more quiet waters were reached as the lee side of the St. Brandon archipelago was reached.

An expected trip of 24 hours turned into 30 hours, and the crew finally anchored off Rafael Island on Monday at sunset (1730 hours local time). With darkness imminent, the camp equipment and food was transferred into small boats belonging to Rafael Island fishermen to make the remaining 500 meters to the flat sandy shore. The fishermen helped us offload the boats, the camp was erected in total darkness, and a hasty meal was prepared. The final destination had been reached!

### Bringing life to 3B7RF

Early the next day the heavy equipment—

antennas, radios, two diesel generators—and a large supply of fresh water were brought ashore. We decided to concentrate on getting the CW stations operational as rapidly as possible on the classical bands. The CW tent, two stations and one generator were assembled along with two triband yagis. Following some last minute work to eliminate RF from the laptops, and a few introductory QSOs by Karl to announce our presence to the world, the CW operators plunged into the pile-ups, which lasted around the clock for the next 11 days. That evening, Joe placed the first-ever telephone call from St. Brandon using the Inmarsat satellite telephone.

Installation of the SSB tent and SSB stations was completed the next day. The Cushcraft X-7 antenna was erected by our now well-trained team (in total they erected 6 Cushcraft yagis on 10 meter steel telescoping masts). Because of its weight, the X-7 was only installed at a height of 7 meters. Prior to commencing full operation of the four stations, the team took time out for a short meeting to discuss the daily routine that would continue for the next 11 days. By Friday, May 8th, all four stations were fully operational, and by Saturday the team was QRV on RTTY and PACTOR.

### Station equipment

The stations were comprised of four Yaesu FT-1000MP transceivers, one FT-920, two Yaesu VL-1000 power amplifiers and two Ameritron AL-80BX power amplifiers. ICE bandpass filters were used to combat interstation interference. Antennas consisted of six Cushcraft yagis, one Battle Creek Special, one TitanX 80 and one 40 meter full wave loop. Compaq laptops running CT 9.36 were used for logging and two 5.5 KVA diesel generators provided power for the operation. Equipment failures were minimal and antenna failures were non-existent.

### Operating

Our task was to operate two CW sta-

tions and two SSB stations around the clock for 11 days with 14 operators. In addition, we had one RTTY station to keep on the air as much as possible. One day, May 14th, was chosen as the day when we concentrated on RTTY for a 24-hour period to meet the demand.

We chose 4-hour operating shifts and each day's operating plan was laid out by first determining which bands were to be covered by time of day for each of the four primary stations. A propagation study done by Bob, NM7M, and Walter, W7SE, formed the basis of the frequency plan, along with operating results from the prior day. Each operator selected his desired station and shifts, with our operations manager, Hans Peter, filling in the blanks.

### Band selection

Covering all 9 HF bands was a challenge but, in general, propagation conditions were good throughout our stay. There were always several bands open simultaneously with stations waiting for us. It really was a coin toss as to which band would yield the best rates to JA, Europe or North America. We constantly reviewed the log statistics and the propagation plans when developing the next day's operating plan in order to equalize band coverage. In our planning we decided not to work SSB on 160 or 75 meters since these would yield relatively low rates.

We made a total of 53,656 QSOs which broke down as follows: 19,696 SSB; 33,187 CW; and 773 RTTY.

### Pilot stations

Our pilots were HB9BGN, HB9MX, W6TER, 4F3CV, and JH3GRO. HB9MX watched the DX scene in Europe and HB9BGN kept in touch with us via Inmarsat. The pilots compiled e-mail messages and passed comments to us daily. Each evening we sent the logs of the day's operation via Inmarsat to HB9BGN who relayed them to W6TER for posting to the 3B7RF and VE7TC websites.

The 3B7RF website can be found on

(Continued on page 3)

## St. Brandon.....from page 2

the Internet at <www.3b7-brandon.ch.>.

### Everyday life on Rafael

During spare time, the team slept, took photos, had endless eyeball QSOs, and swam in the lagoon, although swimming in deep water was avoided due to sharks. An easy walk around the island took, at most, one-half hour. As there was no map of the island, Urs surveyed the island by means of GPS satellite navigation and a compass. Drinking water, brought here by ship, was scarce and rain water was collected into barrels. Sea water was used for daily baths and laundry.

### Goodbye Rafael

SSB operations ceased on Saturday, May 16th, and that equipment was disassembled and packed. On Sunday, CW operations were completed, and all the equipment was loaded aboard the *Umbrina II* by nightfall.

Our last dinner on Rafael was a celebration. We had as our guests the kitchen crew of the fishermen who had done our cooking and the officers from the meteorological station. Karl conducted a ceremony with a speech about our successful efforts; i.e., about his dream coming true, about the good team spirit, about the kindness of the fishermen. A few bottles of whiskey and Swiss Army knives with our callsign engraved were given as gifts. After the speeches, our cook surprised us with a lively Sega performance, the island music of Mauritius.

### Rough seas again

Beginning at 0500 local time on Monday, personal gear was packed and we prepared for embarking once again on *Umbrina II*. Once on the ship, however, we were faced with bad news—due to bad weather we were unable to start our trip back.

After detours and delays that left us short of food on board (biscuits and water only), we reached the waters off Mauritius which, by then, was a welcome sight, indeed!

On Thursday, May 21st at 1100 *Umbrina II* stopped her engines at the pier in Port Louis.

The manager of Rafael Fishing Co. hosted us with sandwiches and coffee which we eagerly gobbled up after three days on a very limited menu. Unloading equipment, transport to the airport and Customs clearing occupied the balance of the day. The first fresh water shower back in the St. George's Hotel after 14 days of sea water was just great! Dinner in a Chinese restaurant was delightful and finally there was enough cold beer for everyone!

### Farewell

On Friday we took a sightseeing trip to the southernmost part of Mauritius. In the evening we hosted a farewell party for the ship's crew, government representatives and radio amateurs of the Mauritius Amateur Radio Society (MARS). We decorated the place with our national flags and our sponsors' banners.

### Sponsors and QSL cards

In addition to INDEXA, major sponsors of 3B7RF were the ARRL Colvin Award, Northern California DX Foundation, Cushcraft, Yaesu Radio, Funk-Amateur (Germany), RSGB DXpedition Fund, Danish DX Club, German DX Foundation and Chiltern DX Club. In addition, many other businesses, professional organizations, local DX associations and individuals stepped

up to the plate to make the trip possible with their generous support. Unfortunately, a deficit remains in the order of 1CHF (about \$0.66) per QSO. It is hoped that contributions sent in with QSL requests will significantly offset that balance.

QSLs are being handled by members of the club station, HB9RF. Mail address: HB9RF, Postfach 37, CH-6319 Allenswinden, Switzerland.

*This article is condensed from a copyrighted article, 1998, by G. I. Wagner, K5KG.*

## Franz Langner's, DJ9ZB, DX World Guide 1998 Edition

INDEXA director and CQ DX Hall of Famer Franz Langner, DJ9ZB, has released a new edition of his *DX World Guide*.

The 354-page book devotes a separate page to each DXCC country and includes licensing information, photos, and QSL cards from past DXpeditions. In addition, it includes maps, QSL bureaus, IOTA numbers, information about WAZ, ITU zones, grid squares, prefixes, radio clubs, UTC information, and much more.

The price is 40DM or US \$25, including airmail postage. Send order to **Joe Kraft, DL8HCZ, Gruetzmuehlenweg 23, Hamburg D-22339, Germany.**

E-mail: <funk-telegramm@t-online.de>.

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